The Island of Enchantment

Justus Miles Forman

THE DOGE SAT ALONE IN A GREAT CARVEN CHAIR

THE ISLAND OF ENCHANTMENT

BY

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I

Young Zuan Gradenigo

Evil tidings have their own trick of spreading abroad. You cannot bury them. The news which had come secretly to Venice was known from the Giudecca to Madonna dell' Orto in two hours. Before noon it was in Murano.

Young Zuan Gradenigo, making his way on foot from the crowded Mer-

ceria into the Piazza di San Marco, ran upon his friend, the young German captain, whom men called Il Lupo — his name was Wölfart — and learned, what almost every other man in the city already knew, how Lewis of Hungary, taking excuse of a merchant ship looted in Venetian waters, was on his way to a second invasion, and had given over the Dalmatian towns to the ban of Bosnia to ravage.

The two men were still eagerly discussing the matter and its probable outcome, half an hour later, standing beside one of the gayly painted booths which, at this time — the spring of 1355—were clustered about the foot of the great Campanile, when a ser-

vant in the livery of the doge touched young Zuan's arm and, in a low tone, gave him a message.

Gradenigo turned back to the German.

"My uncle wishes to see me at once in the palace," he said. "If you are not pressed, go to my house and wait for me there. I may have important news for you." Then, with a parting wave of the hand, he went quickly across the Piazzetta and under the gateway to the right of St. Mark's.

At the head of the great stair two men were awaiting him, and they led him at once through a narrow passage with secret sliding-doors to an inner cabinet of the private apart-

ments of the newly elected doge, his uncle, Giovanni Gradenigo.

The doge sat alone in a great carven chair before a table which was littered with papers and with maps and with writing-materials. From a high window at one side colored beams of light slanted down and rested in crimson and blue splashes upon the dark oak of the table and what lay there, and upon the rich velvet of the doge's robe, and upon his peculiar cap of office. He was not a very old man, but he was far from strong. Indeed, even at this time he was slowly wasting away with the disease which carried him off a year later, but as he sat there, bowed before the table, he looked old and very worn

and tired. His face had no color at all. It was like a dead man's face—cold and damp.

And yet, although he was ill and seemed quite unfit for labors or duties of any sort, he was in reality an unusually keen and shrewd man, capable of unremitting toil. There burned somewhere within the shrunken, pallid body an astonishingly fierce flame of life. He had been elected to office hard upon the Faliero catastrophe partly because his name was one of the very greatest in Venice—two others of his house had worn the cap and ring within the century past—but chiefly because his sympathies were as remote as possible from the liberal views of the poor old man who had preceded

him. He was patrician before all else, and fiercely tenacious of patrician rights—fiercely proud of his name and possessions.

He did not move as his nephew entered the room, only his pale eyes rose slowly to the young man's face and as slowly dropped again to the table before him. Young Zuan pulled forward one of the heavy, uncomfortable chairs of carved wood and sat down in it. He was wondering very busily what his uncle wanted of him, but he knew the old man too well to ask questions. Besides that, it would not have been respectful.

Presently the pale eyes rose again.

"You have — heard?" asked the doge, in his thin voice.

Young Zuan nodded.

"It is all over Venice," he said. "That Angevin devil Lewis is coming westward again, and, to begin with, has set his friend the ban on Zara and Spalato. He chose his time well, God knows!" He paused a moment as if in expectation of comment, but old Giovanni's face was a death-mask, immobile, and he went on: "As Il Lupo, the German captain, said to me a quarter of an hour ago, 'Venice is a very sick man—poison within, wounds without.' We shall lose Dalmatia."

Old Giovanni nodded once or twice, and for a moment he closed his pale eyes, sitting quite motionless in his great chair. It was as if he ceased even to breathe. Then, quite suddenly, the

eyes snapped open and a swift flame of rage seemed to leap up in the old man, amazing in its unexpectedness. A momentary patch of crimson glowed upon each of the gray cheeks.

"That dog may have Dalmatia," he cried, "but, by God and by my ring of office! I'm damned if he shall have Arbe! I won't give up Arbe! I want to die there!"

Now Arbe needs a very brief word of comment. It was, and is, one of the northern Dalmatian islands—a tiny island, claw-fashioned, ten miles long, perhaps, not more than a mile wide at its thickest. It is hemmed about by greater isles—Veglia to the north, Cherso and Lussin Grande to the west, Pago to the south. Eastward the

high, bare, rocky rampart of the Croatian hills rises sheer from the sea, almost throwing its shadow over the island that nestles under it. The northern expanse of Arbe is wooded, but at the extremity of one south-stretching claw sits a city in miniature.

It was at this time, and had been for more than a century, a summer resort for several of the great Venetian families, who had built there villas and campanili and churches as beautiful as anything beside the Grand Canal, though no more beautiful than those of the true, native, Arbesan families, such as the De Dominis and Nemira and Zudeneghi. As a witness that I do not lie, you may see the ruins of them even now—magnificent ruins, dwelt in by a

horde of fishermen. And among these great families, by far the foremost had been the Gradenigo. There were three Gradenigo villas, cloistered and courtyarded, which were magnificent enough to be called palaces; a Gradenigo had, early in the thirteenth century, built the highest and finest of the four campanili — it still stands; a Gradenigo had been several times count of the island. Hence, as you see, Arbe was peculiarly a Gradenigo pride. It was the apple of their eye. Hence also you will comprehend old Giovanni's sudden flare of rage. His withered heart was wrung with fear. He saw, I have no doubt, hideous visions of the ban's barbarians slaying, looting, wielding torch and hammer in his fairy-land.

Young Zuan looked up with new concern.

"A-ah!" he said, half under his breath. "Arbe!—I had not thought of Arbe." His tone took on a shade of doubt.

"Is it likely," he wondered, aloud, "that the ban will go out of his way to attack the island? It's of no value whatever, strategically. It would be mere wanton vandalism."

"And what," snarled old Giovanni, "is that mongrel Bosnian but a vandal? 'Likely,' say you? It is more than that. The dog has sworn to take Arbe and give it to that Magyar strumpet of his, Yaga. He knows nothing would hurt me more. He went about Zara, a week ago, boasting openly of what

he meant to do — so the word comes."

Young Zuan flushed red and cursed under his breath.

"That is beyond bearing!" he said. "That woman in Arbe? That shameless, thieving wanton who stole away Natalia Volutich?"

The doge nodded, licking his blue lips. "The same," he said. "The ban's Yaga would appear to have a grudge against the house of Gradenigo."

About a year before this time, for the sake of cementing a closer union between the two republics, a marriage had been arranged between young Zuan Gradenigo and the daughter of the Ragusan Senator Volutich. But before Zuan had reached Ragusa to

make his visit of ceremony and see his prospective bride, the girl, riding with her women a little way beyond the land gate of the town, had been stolen by brigands. Such things were by no means extraordinary. Nothing had been heard of her since, save that, a fortnight after her capture, a letter, couched in most insulting terms, had come to Ragusa from the Princess Yaga, that infamous favorite of the ban, saying that the girl was in her household and somewhat preferred it to her former home.

"It's beyond bearing!" said young Zuan again, and he was so angry that his voice shook. Then, after the two had for a moment stared into each other's eyes, he threw out his hands

with a little laugh of sheer exasperation.

"But what can we do?" he cried. "Madonna Santissima, what can we do? With this war upon our hands the council will never consent to sending aid to Arbe, which is, after all, of importance to only a few families."

"They *must* consent!" said the doge, fiercely. "I will not lose Arbe! Look you! Who are the families concerned? Loredan, Morosini, Dandolo, Celsi, Venier, Contarini, Corner. All of them members of the Ten. I will see them, and, among us, we shall be able to arrange it. The thing must remain a private matter. We who love Arbe must go to Arbe's aid unofficially. Three galleys will suffice. They must

leave to-night, and the council must not know of it until after they have sailed."

Young Zuan looked up with a certain awe, for the scheme, when one considered the state of internal affairs in Venice at that time, was almost madness.

"It is a desperate plan," he said, gravely. "You must feel very deeply to risk such a scheme, after the Faliero affair."

Old Giovanni Gradenigo beat his yellow hand upon the table before him, and once again the two spots of color came out upon his sunken cheeks.

"I will not lose Arbe!" he cried for the third time. "Leave the risk and the arrangements to me. As for you,

Zuan, you must go at the head of the expedition. I want a Gradenigo to rescue my island, and you are the only one of the house who is experienced in warfare."

"Oh yes, of course I should go," said Zuan. "I have the best right." He rose to take his leave. "I shall have a busy day of it," he said, "but I can have the three galleys ready before midnight, and secretly at that. I shall take Il Lupo with me. He is very faithful and a better man than I. When shall I come to you for instructions and authority? I must have authority to clear the galleys, of course."

"Come to-night when I send for you," said the doge. "Everything

shall be ready for you." He had sunk wearily back in his great chair once more, and all signs of life had faded from his face. It seemed to his nephew that he looked more than ever like a dead man. He raised one feeble hand a little way as if in sign of dismissal, but the hand dropped back upon the carved wood of the chair-arm with a sort of dry rattle, and Zuan left him so, still, silent, deathly, with the bars of colored light from the high window slanting across his velvet robes in billets and lozenges of vert and gules and azure.

The three galleys which slipped gently out of the canal of the Giudecca that night bore southward before a

favoring maestrale. Of one galley young Zuan Gradenigo held the command, of another the German called Il Lupo, and of the third a Venetian captain whose name does not matter. By noon of the next day they were off Lussin Grande, and hove to, well out of sight of land, to await the darkness. They saw during the day nothing to disturb them. No ship passed save a Venetian fishing-boat or two, high-prowed and with colored triangular sails painted with some device; also, in the afternoon, three great trabacoli south bound from Trieste or Pola, bluff-bowed craft, with hawse-ports painted to represent ferocious eyes.

Towards evening the maestrale died away, as it so often does in these

waters, and from the south a sirocco arose, bringing a rack of clouds over the sky and a heavy dampness to the air. Before dark it was freshening fast and a fine rain was beginning to drive. The three galleys pitched and plunged heavily in the mounting sea. Young Gradenigo signalled to the two other ships, and, leading the way himself, ran for the southern point of Lussin. He knew that, once within the shelter of the islands and scoglie, he would be well out of danger, for there is never a sea there, even though a storm may be raging outside.

By the time he reached the tranquil shelter between Lussin and Pago the night had fallen, black dark. It rained in spells, but once in a while the

driving rack overhead parted for a moment and a flash of moonlight came down. Young Zuan ordered the galley brought to, and waited for one of these momentary floods of light. The light came, touching with silver the great, tumbling seas outside the barrier reef, but the seas were empty. There were no galleys making for the southern point of Lussin. Gradenigo turned with an oath of surprise to the old sailing-master who stood beside him, sheltering his eyes from the wind with one brown hand.

"They have been driven northward," he said. "They'll have to run between Cherso and the main-land and beat south again by Veglia." The sailing-master shook his head gloomily.

"It is a bad night, lord," said he. "That sea will be hell in another hour." And he moved off forward to give orders to his men.

There seemed nothing for it but to go on, and, in the sheltered cove at the north of Arbe, where the disembarkment was to take pace, await the other ships. Young Zuan felt no great anxiety over them; he was sure that they had merely been driven northward, and would have to round Cherso, and then make their way down again through the sheltered "canal" between that island and Veglia. His only fear was that they might not reach Arbe before morning, in which case the relief of the city—granting always that the ban's expedition had already

occupied it—would have to be delayed until another night.

He put about again, and, running before the strong sirocco (the wind, of course, reaches these sheltered waters, somewhat abated, though there is no sea), made out the lights of Arbe within two hours. In another hour, leaving the galley well to the west of the island and hidden in the gloom, he was in a skiff, rowed by two strong sailormen, creeping round the walls of the city.

Now it has been said that the city occupies a southward-jutting claw of rock. The villas and streets, indeed, crowd to the very edge of the narrow ridge. On the western side the seawall, a hundred feet high, rises sheer

from the water, and is continued upward by the walls of the buildings. Eastward, however, round the point, the land slopes lower, and here is a sheltered cove in the crook of the rocky claw, with a mole and landing-place of hewn stone. Upon the landing-place opens a public square.

Young Zuan in his skiff crept round the point, and, always under the shelter of the sea-wall, into the still harbor where was the landing-place. Fifty yards from the point where the sea-wall dropped to the water's level and the open square began, he halted. From the wall near by lion heads of carved stone projected, and in each beast's mouth hung a great bronze ring for mooring ships. One of the two sailor-

men laid hold of a ring and held the skiff steady, and Zuan rose to his feet to look.

Far over his head the wind—driving a thin rain before it once more—shrieked and whistled past the roofs of Arbe, and flapped the gay awnings which hung over the marble balconies. Once, above the wind's noise, a woman's shriek rose and held and then died suddenly. Beyond, in the open square, a great fire blazed on the flags, and hurrying men in strange dress threw armfuls of fuel upon it. Others held hands and danced about the fire in a ring, like devils, singing a weird and wild chant. It was a fine chant and stirring, and these Huns sang it well, but to young Zuan Gradenigo's

ears it was the baying of unclean dogs.

He dropped back upon the thwart of his skiff with a sobbing curse. The ban's Magyar strumpet was set where the ban had sworn to set her.

"Row to the galley!" he said, and as the two sailor-men bent to their work, standing at their oars gondolier fashion, and the skiff leaped forward through the wet gloom, he laid his face in his hands and it twisted and worked bitterly. He was by no means a coward, and he was not a particularly imaginative man, but the picture of that leaping fire and the leaping, chanting devils about it persisted before his eyes, and he looked forward to the struggle which was to come, and an

odd premonition of disaster took possession of him and would not be driven away.

In the tiny sheltered cove of rendezvous, two miles above the city, they anchored the galley and disembarked. There is a rocky headland beside the cove, high at its outer end, and here certain trusty officers took their station, with lanterns muffled in their cloaks, to watch for the approach of the other two ships. Young Zuan went within a deserted fisherman's hut which stood where wood and beach met, and there held council with his sailing-master and his chief lieutenant. He was still strong in the belief that Il Lupo's ship and the other were safe and would arrive in a few hours—it was by now

somewhat after midnight—but the old sailing-master again shook a gloomy head. He had served Venice for forty years on land and sea, and he was a pessimist.

There arose cries and shoutings without, and a petty officer burst into the hut, puffed with importance and pride.

"Prisoners, lord!" he reported. "Three spies caught skulking and peeping in the wood."

"Bring them in!" said young Zuan. "And keep those men quiet outside. Do you wish the whole island to know we are here?"

The prisoners were thrust into the room—great, squat, hairy fellows in the barbaric dress of Huns, surly and

villanous. They would not speak. It was evident that they understood neither Italian nor Greek, and they affected not to comprehend the sailing-master's halting efforts at their own tongue. They only stared under their shaggy brows, silent and stolid, and tugged at the hands which were bound behind them.

"Are these men?" cried out young Zuan, in fine Venetian scorn. "Take the cattle away! Bind their feet and set a guard over them. Hark! What is that?"

That was a woman's scream from without, low and very angry.

"But a woman, lord," explained the officer who had brought in the prisoners —"a young wench who was prowling

with these fellows and was taken with them. Asking your lordship's pardon, I thought it idle to bring her to you—a common wench."

"Take these men away," said young Gradenigo, "and bring in the woman. It may be that she speaks a Christian tongue."

She crept into the hut, pressing against the side of the doorway, and stood against the farther wall—a girl, a mere slip of a girl, with her long brown hair down over her eyes. And there against the wall she stood, shaking, her hands twisting together over her breast, and her eyes, like the eyes of a hunted, cornered animal, went swiftly from one face to another of the men across the room, and finally settled upon the face

of Zuan Gradenigo, and did not stir for a long time.

She stood in her thin white shift, and on her bared arms were marks as if rough hands and none too clean had been there.

When young Zuan spoke his voice was gentle and kindly, the maid was so sore beset, so full of fear, so alone.

"Do you—understand Italian?" he asked. The maid did not answer him, but when she spoke she spoke in perfectly fluent Venetian dialect—as good Venetian as Gradenigo's own. And the fear seemed to go from her, giving place to anger.

"My garments, lord!" she said, and laid her bruised arms across her bosom in a little, pitiful gesture of outraged

modesty. "Your men have taken them from me. I am ashamed, lord. They—laid their foul hands on my arms." Her face twisted as at the memory of insult, and the lieutenant who stood across the room laughed aloud. Young Zuan turned upon him fiercely.

"Hold your laughter for a fitter excuse!" he said. "Are we Huns, to insult women? Go out to those men and find the maid's garments. Bring them here." The man went, staring, and, at a motion of Gradenigo's head, the sailing-master followed him, leaving the two alone.

"I am sorry, child," said Zuan Gradenigo. "We did not come here to ill-treat women. I shall see that my men

are punished for what they have done. Meanwhile—" He took up the mantle which he had put aside over a near-by bench, and, crossing the room, laid it over the girl's shoulders. It covered her almost to the feet. And when he had done this he stood, for what he imagined to be a moment, looking down into the eyes that held his so steadily — brave eyes, unafraid, unclouded, unwavering. One could not be harsh or cruel in the gaze of such—even though they looked from the face of an enemy. An enemy? Nonsense! A girl taken by chance as she wandered through the wood—as she peeped, full of childish curiosity, at the disembarkment of a ship's load of soldiers. Brave eyes, unafraid. That was why

HE LAID THE MANTLE OVER THE GIRL'S SHOULDERS

they held him so, because they fronted him without fear — even with trust.

Ay, doubtless that was why they held him so, and yet— He stirred restlessly. Such great eyes! With such illimitable depths! How came a wandering child by such eyes? They moved him oddly. The child would seem to be an uncommon child. Those steady, burning eyes of hers had some uncommon power, worked some strange spell, some sorcery, not evil, but unfamiliarly sweet, unknown to his experience.

He gave a little, confused laugh and raised an uncertain hand towards his head, but the girl had, at the same moment, put out one of her own hands

to fasten the clasp of Zuan's mantle at her throat, and his fingers touched her arm.

At that, as if it brought back her injuries to mind, she dropped her eyes, and the man was loosed incontinently from his chains.

"Lord!" she cried again, flushing red in the light of the lanterns, "they put their foul hands upon me! They put their hands upon me!" The very present peril in which she might well have believed herself to stand seemed not to occur to her. It seemed that only those rough, befouling hands were in her mind. Her face gave once more its little, shivering twist of anger and repulsion.

"They shall be punished, child!"

said Zuan Gradenigo, between tight lips. "Oh, they shall suffer for it, you may be sure. And now"—he took a turn away from her, for her great eyes were upon him again, level and unafraid—"now will you tell me who you are and how you came to be found with those barbarians to-night? Surely you can have no traffic with such. Surely you are a lady. I have seen that." And indeed he had seen, while the girl stood in her thin white shift, how beautifully she was made—deep-bosomed, slim-waisted, with tapering wrists and ankles, and round white throat. No common wench was there. There was good blood under that white skin of hers.

"Surely you are a lady," said young

Zuan, but the girl bent her head from him.

"Nay, lord," she said, very low, "I am only—a serving-maid to the Princess Yaga."

The red flamed into Zuan's cheeks.

"That woman!" he cried. "You serve that vile fiend in human flesh, that royal strumpet, that wanton at whose name men spit? *You?*" The girl stared at him under her brows.

"Oh!" cried Zuan Gradenigo. "Where is God that hell could devise such a wrong? What was God doing that you should stray into such clutches and He not know? That—that monster of vice and uncleanness!" He pointed a shaking hand towards the south.

"There she sits," said he, "polluting the castle where Jacopo Corner has sat for so many years, where my grandfather sat before him, and his father before him. There she sits gloating; but, by God and St. Mark's lion! before this week is over I shall tear her head from her body and throw it to the dogs. Nay! better than that! I shall send it, in the name of Venice, to the ban who sent her here to shame us."

"Lord!" said the maid, very low—"lord! Oh, you do not know! You—speak wildly. You do not know what you say."

"I know," said Zuan Gradenigo, "that all I say is true. That woman's name is infamous throughout Europe.

It is a name of scorn. It means all that is vile—as you must know. Will Arbe ever be clean from her — even when we have washed its stones with her blood? But *you!*" he cried, in a new voice. "Oh, child, that *you* should have to serve her—be near to her! I cannot think of it with calmness."

The maid turned a little away from him and moved over to the wooden bench where Zuan's mantle had lain. And she seated herself at one end of the bench, looking across the room at him very soberly.

"And why not I, lord," she asked, "as well as another? What do you know of me? I am—a serving-maid, and such must serve whomever they may." He came nearer and stared

into her face, and his own was oddly troubled, frowning.

"I cannot think of you—so," he said. "A serving-maid? There's something strange here. Oh, child, you have something about you—I cannot say what it is, for I have no words. I fight, I am not a poet, but were I such, I think—your eyes—their trick of looking—their—I cannot say what I mean. A serving-maid? Oh, child, you are fitter for velvets and jewels! I do not understand. Something breathes from you," he said, with that trouble upon his frowning face, an odd trouble in his eyes—bewildered, uncomprehending—like a child's eyes before some mystery. "Something breathes from you. I do not know what it is."

The maid looked at him in the yellow, flickering lantern-light, and she made as though she would speak, but in the end shook her head and turned it a little aside, and sat once more silent. And for a time the man also was silent, watching her averted face and thinking how amazingly beautiful it was; not white with the pallor which the Venetian women so prized, but sumptuously rich of color, sun-kissed, free, unashamed of the wholesome blood which flowed under its golden skin and stained it with red on either cheek. He found himself possessed of a mad desire to touch that cheek which was nearest him with his finger, and the sheer folly, the childishness of the thought would in any other mood have

shaken a laugh of scorn from him. He was not a woman's man, as he had said, but a fighter.

One of the maid's hands stirred in her lap and dropped beside her on the wooden bench. The lantern-light fell upon it—long, slender, tapering.

"Your hand, child!" said young Zuan. "It is not the hand of a serving-maid. It has never done rough tasks."

"My princess is kind to me, lord," she said. "My tasks are easy."

He put out an uncertain hand and touched the hand that lay in the lantern-light. The maid drew a little, quick, gasping breath, and her eyes turned to him, great and dark. Then, like two silly, half-grown children

caught holding hands, they both flushed red and their eyes turned aside once more.

Zuan raised a hand to his temples, where the blood throbbed.

"I — do not know what has come over me," he said, and turned a few steps away across the room. In a moment he was back again, on one knee before her.

"You lay a spell upon me!" he cried, whispering into her bent face. "I am unmanned. Strange things stir my heart, child—mount to my head like wine. You lay a spell upon me."

"No, lord," she said, very low. "I am but a maid. I cannot work spells or sorcery. It is only that I am alone and beset and miserable. It is pity

that you feel, lord. Ah, you are kind and merciful. Lord, I—wish that I might do you a service for the service you have done me."

"Pity?" said young Zuan.

"Pity, lord," she said again, and to his awkward, unskilful tongue and to his unaccustomed hands no occupation seemed to come, so that he knelt silent and troubled before her in the lantern-light.

If it seem that enchantment came overswiftly upon him, overprecipitately, it must be borne in mind that he was a soldier, wholly unused to a woman's company, and that this girl, young, beautiful, and in sore straits, was brought before him in the manner most certain to waken his chivalry—

ay, to stir his ready heart. The maid spoke shrewdly. It was pity he felt. But other emotions wait hard upon pity's threshold. Further, in young Zuan's day, love came swiftly or not at all. It was not the day of courtship. Love was born of a look—a smile—a hand-touch. And such love has wrecked empires. It is a sober truth that no great passion was ever of slow maturing.

There came from without the door eager voices and quick steps, and the lieutenant whom Zuan had sent to fetch the maid's outer garments—krozet, saruk, and girdle—burst into the room. His eyes were round, starting out of his head, and his face was flushed with excitement.

"She's still here, lord?" he cried out, almost before he had entered. "The woman is here? You have not let her go?" His gaze searched the hut swiftly.

"She is here," said Zuan Gradenigo, "but you will speak more respectfully. Give me the garments!" The man's excitement was too great to heed reproofs. He thrust the things he held into his master's arms.

"See!" he cried. "See the girdle—the necklace — the charm she wore about her neck! See whom we have taken!"

Young Zuan looked at the jewels, and they slipped from his fingers and fell, flashing in the light, and lay about his feet. He turned very slowly tow-

ards the girl, who stood against the farther side of the wall, and his eyes were once more like a child's eyes—bewildered, hurt, uncomprehending. He stretched out a hand towards her, and the hand shook and wavered.

"It is the princess herself!" cried the lieutenant. "It is Yaga!" and fell into a chattering, hysterical laugh.

"It is not—true," whispered Zuan Gradenigo, across the little room. "Say it is not true!" His voice rose to a sharp, agonized appeal, but there was no conviction in his tone. He knew.

At the name the girl had cried out suddenly, and to smother the cry she caught her two hands up to her mouth. Even then her eyes went from one man to the other, swift and keen.

"Say it is not true!" pleaded Zuan Gradenigo, but the lieutenant babbled on, stammering in his excitement.

"See, Messer Zuan! We have her! We have her fast! Why not set sail at once with her on board—at once, before they in the city know she is taken? Why not? See! they are helpless without her. We can force them to give up Arbe for her. She is worth fifty Arbes to them — all of Dalmatia, perhaps. Why not do that? Messer Lupo's galley has not come, nor the other. We can do nothing alone. Take her on board, lord, before it is too late, and set sail. Leave Arbe to itself for a little. The Huns will give it up to us. Come, come!"

It is doubtful if young Zuan even

heard. His eyes, stricken and hopeless, were upon the girl across the room, and he whispered over and over again:

"Say it is not true! Say it is not true!" But the woman's eyes were upon the floor, and her hands dropped to her breast, and then to her side with a little forlorn gesture, and she bent her head.

"It is true, lord," she said. "I am the princess Yaga."

The lieutenant gave a great shout and dashed out to his fellows. Young Zuan dropped down upon the near-by bench, covering his face.

Then the woman came to him, crossing the room swiftly, and dropped upon her knees on the floor beside him.

"Lord!" she said, touching his arm

with her two hands—"lord, it would have been of no avail to deny it. You would have found me out in time. I am that—dreadful woman, lord; perhaps not so dreadful as you have thought; perhaps men have lied about me—made things worse than they truly are. Still—lord—" She crept closer to him on her knees, and her hands pressed eagerly at his arm. "Lord, it was wise, very wise, what your officer begged you to do. You have me fast—the ban's Yaga. Will you not set sail with me and leave Arbe? Will you not hold me hostage for your island? The ban will give it up to you in exchange for me. Lord, will you not do this?" She pleaded with him in an odd tone of eager

anxiety which might have aroused his suspicions had the man been less overwhelmed in his misery. I do not think he heard more than the pleading voice. I do not think he followed her words at all.

"Lord!" she cried again, shaking his arm with her two hands, "will you not do this? It will be best for you. Oh, far best! Listen, lord! You have been kind to me, gentle and pitiful. You saved me from—from great shame at the hands of those men. You saved me when you knew that I must be an enemy—even though you did not know how great an enemy—and now I am trying to save you. You are in great danger, lord, you and your men. *Will* you not listen to me?"

Young Zuan raised a white face, and his eyes looked bitterly into the woman's eyes that burned so near.

"Danger?" he said, dully, under his breath. It seemed as if he did not care. "What danger?"

And then, as if his gaze held for her some of the strange sorcery which hers had laid upon him, the woman faltered in her swift speech, and she gave a little sob.

"Oh!" she cried. "Why did I not know? Why did I not know?"

"What danger?" repeated Zuan Gradenigo, as if the words meant nothing to him.

"They know that you are here, lord," she said. "We knew, in the city, that you were coming. The fishing-boat

which passed you this morning at sea brought us news of three galleys from Venice. Now two of your galleys have been blown away by the sirocco. You are but a few men, a handful, and you will be overwhelmed. Oh, lord, we whom your men took to-night were spying upon you, but there were three more who escaped—three more men. They will have reached the city before this time, and you may be attacked at any moment. Lord, *why* do you sit there silent? Why will you not take me on board your ship and sail away?"

It came dully to Gradenigo's mind, through the stress and whirl which obscured it, that the maid showed a strange eagerness, out of reason.

"Why do you tell me this?" he asked, suddenly. "Why not let your barbarians capture us—put us to death? Why do you wish to defeat your own cause? There's trickery here." He rose to his feet, frowning, but the woman was before him.

"If you — cannot see — lord," she said, and a bit of bright color came into her cheeks, "then I cannot tell you." Suddenly she put out her two hands upon his breast and fell to sobbing.

"I will not have you killed!" she cried. "Oh, lord, I will not have you taken or slain! For your men I care nothing. They may die where they stand and it will be nothing to me, but *you*—lord, I cannot bear to have you taken!" There was no trickery

in that. It came from the woman's soul, shaking her sorely.

Zuan looked at her, this slim, pale girl shaken with her sobbing — this monster of vice and sin, at whose name men spat with derision—and again he felt the strange, paralyzing weakness creep over him. He could not hate her. He turned his eyes away and shook himself into attention.

"Come!" he said, "we will go. You cannot be lying to me. We will go."

But before he could take a step there arose in the night without a babel of cries and screams and the clashing of steel. Above it all the same strange, barbaric chant which those devils leaping about the fire in the landing-place of the city had sung together.

"Too late!" cried the girl. "Oh, too late! They are here already!"

Zuan Gradenigo sprang silently for his sword, which he had laid aside in a far corner of the room, but as he did so the woman threw herself upon the half-open door of the hut and crashed it to, swinging the great bar into place.

"You shall not go!" she said, in a gasping whisper. "You shall not go out there to be slain!"

"Out of my way!" cried Zuan, sword in hand. "Out of my way, or by Heaven I'll run you through! Would you have me skulk here while my men are fighting? Get out of my way!" He ran at her and caught her by the arm, swinging her aside from the door, but the woman was back again, on

hands and knees, before he could recover his balance. She caught him about the knees with her arms, and she was as strong as a young animal and as lithe. He could not move.

He raised the Venetian dagger which he held in his left hand. His eyes were on fire.

"Once more," said he, "will you stand out of my way and let me go?" Outside, in the night, the cries and clash of arms clamored on, and that barbaric chant, broken sometimes, sometimes swelling loud and triumphant, rang over all.

"You shall not go through this door!" gasped the woman, clinging fast to young Zuan's knees. "They are four to one out there. They would

kill you the moment you stepped beyond the door."

Strategy came to her, and she shot out a bare arm towards the single window.

"Go by the window!" she cried. "It opens upon a thicket. They will not see you there." She loosed him and he sprang for the window, swinging away the bar and pushing open the heavy wooden shutters.

The woman was upon his heels as he leaped into the night, but he did not know or care. Through the tangle of shrubbery and vine in which he found himself he could see the battle raging in the clear space of the beach beyond, and towards it he fought his way. A heavy creeper laid hold upon his ankles,

and, cursing savagely, he slashed at it with his sword. A little rise of ground was before him. He mounted it in a single leap, and from its crest leaped again.

Then he fell a long way, crashing first through the mask of thicket which covered a narrow ravine, striking thence upon the earth of the farther side and rolling down that. Once or twice he threw out his hands to catch himself, but as he slipped and fell again his head struck upon something hard — a stone, probably — and that was the last he knew.

II

The Woman of Abomination

When young Zuan Gradenigo came once more to his senses after the fall in the dark, it was like a peaceful awakening from sweet sleep. Indeed, literally it was just that, for from the unconsciousness following upon the injury to his head he had drifted easily into slumber, so that when he waked he had, by way of souvenir of his mishap, scarcely even a headache.

That his eyes opened upon blue sky instead of upon painted or carved ceiling roused in him no astonishment. In

service against the Turks and against the Genoese he had often slept in the open, waking when the morning light became strong enough to force its way through his eyelids. He lay awhile, conscious of great comfort and bodily well-being, coming slowly and lazily into full possession of his faculties. The air was fresh and warm, with a scent of thyme in it, and from somewhere in the near distance sea-birds mewed plaintively, after their kind. He dropped his eyes from the pale-blue sky and saw that though he lay upon turf—a hill it would seem, or the crest of a cliff—there was a stretch of tranquil sea before him, a narrow stretch, and beyond this a mountain range looming sheer and barren from the water's edge.

"HE LAY AWHILE CONSCIOUS OF GREAT COMFORT"

The sun must be rising behind it, he said to himself, for the tips of the serrated peaks glowed golden, momentarily brighter, so that it hurt his eyes to watch them. He wondered what mountains these could be, and then, all in a flash, it came upon him where he was—that this was Arbe, and that ridge the Velebic mountains of the main-land.

His mind raced swiftly back to the preceding evening—to the scene in the fisherman's hut, to his dash through the window in an attempt to join his fighting-men, and—there he stopped. He had a confused recollection of falling in the dark, falling a long way, but he was not fully awake yet, and the effort to remember tired him. He

turned upon his side — he had been lying on his back, with his head pillowed upon something soft and comfortable — and, childlike, put up an open hand under his cheek. But when his hand touched that upon which his head had been resting he cried out suddenly and struggled forthright to his feet.

The woman who had saved his life half knelt, half sat behind him, and upon her knees his head had lain. At this moment she was leaning back a little, with her head and shoulders against a small tree which stood there, and her eyes were closed as if she were asleep.

Young Zuan saw that she was very white, and that her closed eyelids were

blue and had blue circles under them. The lids stirred after a moment and she opened her eyes—blank and wondering at first, a child's eyes, then swiftly intelligent.

"Lord!" she said, in a whisper, looking up to him—"lord, I must have—slept! I did not know. I am sorry—lord." She sat forward again and made as though she would rise to her feet, but with the first effort a spasm of agony went over her white face, and she gave a little scream and fell forward, prone, and so fainted quite away.

For a moment young Zuan did not understand. Then, as comprehension came to him, he dropped upon his knees beside the woman with an exclamation of pity.

"The child has come near to killing herself that I might sleep!" he cried. Then, before she should wake to further pain, he set skilfully to work. He straightened the bent and cramped knees and, with his strong hands, rubbed and chafed the stiffened muscles. They were cold as stone, he found, save where his head had lain; all feeling must long since have gone out of them. Then at last, just as he had the blood once more flowing redly under the skin, the woman stirred, moving her hands on the turf beside her, and presently came to her senses.

Her eyes opened — they were not black, as he had thought the night before, but curiously dark blue, almost purple—and she looked up into

young Zuan's face as he knelt above her.

"I would not—have you think me, lord—a weakling," she said, whispering. "It was a—moment's pain. My knees were a little cramped. Will you forgive me, lord?"

"Forgive you?" said he. "You have saved my life. Whether that was worth the saving or not I do not know, but you have saved it, and you have borne great suffering that I might sleep in comfort. Forgive you?"

She lay quite still on the turf, looking up at him, and the old, paralyzing weakness began to creep upon Zuan's limbs, the old, strange shaking came to his heart.

"I would do it, lord," said she,

"many, many times over for your sake." A warm flush spread up into her throat and over her cheeks.

"I do not understand," said Zuan, stammering, and dully he thought how beautiful she was, lying there still before him, how young and slender and exquisite, this woman of abomination. "We are enemies," said he, "the bitterest of enemies. I came here to cleanse Arbe of you, to set your head on a spear before the count's castle for men to revile and spit upon."

"Yes, lord," said the woman of abomination, whispering, and that rosy flush died away from cheeks and neck, leaving her pale again.

"Last night," said he, "you had me in your power. Your men could have

taken me alive or slain me very easily. Yet you would not let me face them. Even when I threatened to kill you you would not stand out of my way."

"You had had me in *your* power first, lord," said she. "But you were kind to me. You saved me from great shame, and covered me with your cloak."

"That was nothing," said young Zuan. "I did not know that you were the princess Yaga. But you knew that I was leader of the force which had come to recover Arbe from you. Why did you save me, princess? Why are you here with me now in hiding? Why are you not in the castle where you should be?"

The flush came again, and for the

first time her eyes fell away from his with a sort of timidity.

"I could not—leave you, lord," she said, whispering again. "I could not see you hurt or slain or a prisoner. And then when, through accident, you lay hurt, after all, I could not leave you so."

"But why? Why?" he persisted, staring down upon her with troubled eyes. "Arbe was in the hollow of your hand! You are the head of those barbarians who hold the city. Yet you desert them to succor me. Why?"

"If you cannot see, lord," she said, hiding her face with her hands, "then I cannot tell you."

Young Zuan gave a sudden cry.

"O God of Miracles!" said he, un-

der his breath. His heart was racing very madly and the veins at his temples throbbed until he thought that they must burst.

He put out faltering hands and took the woman's hands from her face.

"What is it," he said, "that—has come to me to rob me of strength and thought when I am near you? What is it that came to me last night when you first crept into the fisherman's hut and I saw your eyes?"

"Lord," she said, very low, "I think it is love."

Her hands slipped from between his lax palms, and young Zuan got to his feet blindly and moved a few paces away. He put his arms up against the trunk of a tree and laid his face upon

them. Through the whirl of things which beset him he had a dull consciousness that his cherished world—all his sane, ordered life, his duty, his ambitions, his pride of race—was slipping from him, receding into a misty background, leaving him face to face with something that was immeasurably, unthinkably great—something for which he had been begotten and born—something which drew him towards itself with a might that no puny strength of his could combat.

He turned, still blindly, and the woman of abomination, slim, girlish, virginal, with burning eyes, stood before him, her hands at her breast.

"Lord, I think it is—love," she said again.

"And *you*," said Zuan—"*you* what —*you are!*" But it was not really he who said that. It was a last faint protest from the man he once had been.

"Does that matter?" she pleaded, in an agony, her hands going out to him.

Young Zuan took a great breath. "God knows it should matter!" he groaned, "but I cannot make it weigh with me. Your spell is over my heart and soul, and I am sick for helpless love of you. When you touch me I tremble. When I see your eyes the world drops from me and I ride upon the stars breathless in some strange ecstasy. I have drunk madness before you and I am mad. No! It does not matter to me that you are what you are—the woman of abomination. I love you.

You and I are bound together with chains. We cannot live apart."

Then for a time an odd little awkward silence fell upon them. Once Zuan put out his arms towards the woman as if he would take her into them, but as if moved by a sudden panic at what she had roused she shrank back, crying something under her breath that sounded like, "No, no!" And presently he moved past her a few steps down the slope of turf on which they stood, and straightway found himself at the brink of the westward cliff which rose from the water's edge. He knew where they were—some three or four miles north of the city and on the opposite side of the narrow island to where the

fight of the night before had taken place.

"Will you tell me," he said at last, turning—it was a certain relief to break the strain they had been under —"will you tell me how we came here? We are a long way from the fisherman's hut and the cove where my galley lay."

"A lad helped me with you, lord," she said—"a vine-grower's lad whom I befriended two days ago. When you had fallen into the little ravine I found you there at its bottom, and at first I —thought you were dead. You lay so still! Then I felt your heart beat and knew you were only stunned. I tore a strip from my shift and bound your head with it, for your head was bleeding." Young Zuan raised a hand

and for the first time discovered that a bandage was wrapped about his brows. "Then I waited there with you. I waited for a long time, climbing the bank once or twice to see how the fight above was waging. Not many of your men were killed, I think—ten or twelve perhaps—those who fought as rear-guard while the others were swimming and rowing in skiffs out to the ship—"

"Then they got away?" cried young Zuan, eagerly. "The galley got safe away?"

"Yes, lord," she said, "the galley sailed away, and after a time the Huns —*my* Huns—went away too towards the city. When I came out of the ravine at last there was only one man left there—the vine-grower's lad, who

had crept from the wood to see the fighting. I called to him, and between us we raised you and brought you here. You fell asleep without waking from your swoon."

"They got away!" said young Zuan, staring with wide, bright eyes across the strait to where the Velebic cliffs rose gray and fierce. "They got away! They'll meet Il Lupo and the other galleys! They—" A little restless movement from the woman made him turn his head quickly, and the light faded from his eyes.

"That—doesn't matter," he said, in a different tone. "Nothing matters—now." He watched her for a long time under his brows, bitterly at first, but she was such as no man could look

coldly upon, and she had saved his life and gone from triumph into hiding with him. As he looked at her, Il Lupo and the galleys dimmed from his mind.

"What," said he at last, very gently, "is to become of you and me?"

"I do not know, lord," she said. "Oh, lord, a woman, when she loves, does not think of such things or care for them. She does not look ahead. A woman, lord, when she loves, has space in her mind and soul for nothing but love. You—do not know women."

"No," said young Zuan, shaking his head, "I do not know them. That is true. They—have never come into my way."

"I am glad," she said.

"Princess," said he, after a little silence, "it is true, what men say of you?"

"Does it matter?" she asked again. "No, lord, it is not true—at least much of it is not. But you have said it did not matter—you have said so!"

He turned his eyes from the pitifulness of her face.

"It matters," he said, "only in what is to become of us. If it is true, we can never go back to Venice. I must be an outcast from my city and from my people."

She crept nearer to him, where they sat on the cliff's edge, nearer, on her knees, looking eagerly into his face.

"And, lord," she said, watching him, "if it is true—sufficiently true—

would you suffer that for my sake? Would you give up all that to go with me?"

"How could I do otherwise?" said young Zuan, simply, and at that the woman broke into a little sobbing laugh of joy and triumph and tenderness.

"Oh, lord!" she cried, "that were love indeed! Oh, lord, I did not know that there were men so faithful and so good.

"And yet," she said, presently, as if in argument with herself—"yet noble lords of Venice and of Genoa and of Naples and of many Italian cities have married queens and princesses no better than the Princess Yaga."

"It is not that only," said young

Zuan. "There are many evil women in high places—fawned before, bowed down to—in Italy; but you have done one very terrible and shameful thing, princess, which alone must make you hated in Venice forever, and must make marriage between you and me impossible there."

"I—do not understand," she said, wondering.

"You or your brigands," he said, "carried off from Ragusa Natalia Volutich. I was to have married her."

The woman screamed, dragging herself backward over the turf away from him.

"*You—you*," she cried, in a breathless whisper, her hands at her mouth, —"*you* are—Zuan—Gradenigo?"

"Why—yes!" said he. "I thought you knew."

She stumbled to her feet, staring and sobbing.

"Oh, what have I done? What have I done?" she cried, over and over again, and she moved still farther away, staring at him as if he were a ghost risen against her.

"What have I done?" she whispered. Then all at once she began a sobbing, hysterical laugh—a laugh that shook all her slim body, like weeping, and it seemed that she would never have done with it. She covered her face with her hands, leaning against a tree which grew near by, and the fit of endless laughter swept her like a storm. Young Zuan watched her under his brows with

a sort of gloomy resentment. Women, he had been told by those of experience, were creatures of strange and incomprehensible moods, ruled, like a horse, by divers vagaries and not at all by reason. This mad fit of hysteria was, he took it, therefore to be endured as patiently as might be, but he had small store of patience.

"Oh, lord," said the woman, presently, gasping between her fits of laughter, tears in her eyes—"lord, there is a thing which I must tell you—an amazing thing. I do not know whether you will be glad or angry of it. In any case I must tell you at once—"

"Wait!" said Zuan, and held up a hand. "I must know first about this maid, Natalia Volutich, whom you

stole away. What have you done with her, princess?" His tone was very grave and stern.

"The maid Natalia," said she, "has been well treated, lord. She has come to no harm. If this war had not arisen she would have been sent back safely to her father before now."

"Unharmed?" said Zuan Gradenigo, watching the woman's eyes.

"Unharmed, lord," she said. "A maid, as she came. Indeed"—there seemed to be a glimmer of a smile at the woman's lips—"indeed, I think she has not been unhappy, this Natalia of Ragusa. I think she has learned to feel a certain fondness for her mistress. I think she would serve her in any way she could." The smile was a wry

smile now. "Even so vile a thing as I, lord," said the woman of abomination, "can be tender and—faithful. Even so vile a thing as I is sometimes loved. An evil woman, Messer Zuan, is not all evil. There is something of good in the very lowest."

"Princess! Princess!" cried the man.

"And now," she said, "I must tell you what must be told; but, lord, before I tell it will you say to me once more what you have said—that for my sake, to be with me alone, you stand willing—nay, glad—to give up your city and your rank and your friends? Will you say to me that I, woman of infamy though men call me, am dearer to you than everything else in the world?" She came close to him, put-

ting out her two hands upon his breast, and her great eyes burned up into his, and her face seemed for the instant to sharpen, to pale, and her lips trembled.

"Will you tell me once again?" she said, pleading.

"I could not—live without you—child," he said, and she cried out with joy at the name. He had called her "child" on the night before when he did not know who she was.

She stood away from him at arm's-length.

"Now then, at last," she said, "I will tell you what you must know. Lord, I—" Her voice failed suddenly as if she had been stricken ill, and all the rosy color which had risen to her cheeks began to die slowly away. She

seemed to be staring over young Zuan's shoulder towards the north. She raised her hand a little way, but it dropped again weakly by her side. "The—ships!" she said, in a strained whisper. "The—ships!" Zuan turned to look.

Round a little wooded point of the island, scarcely more than a mile to the north of where they stood, came, before the wind, three great Venetian galleys, looming high and stately in that narrow strait.

Zuan gave a great shout. "My ships!" he cried. "My galleys!" His voice ran up into an odd falsetto note which was almost a scream. "Trapani has found Il Lupo, and they are going to attack the city by sea!" He sprang

for his cloak, which lay near, as if he would wave it to attract the attention of those on the galleys, but the woman caught him by the arm, white-faced and breathless.

"No, no!" she cried, swiftly. "No! You—must not go. They must not attack—now. The city could be taken in an hour. Those men—fools! fools! —of ours have destroyed the—engines of defence. They did not know how to use them. And they have—sunk the ships in the harbor. Lord, you must not let your ships attack. We must not lose the city. Oh, it would be cruel, cruel!" She clung to his arms, sobbing, panic-stricken, stumbling desperately over her words.

"Lord, they must not take Arbe!"

she wailed. "All we have done—all *I* have done — gone for nothing — nothing! It is not to be borne. Stop them, lord! You would not be so cruel as to allow this. You do not know—Oh, stop them! Stop them!" She was quite beside herself with terror, but Zuan put her out away from him at arm's-length and held her there.

"Listen!" he said, sharply. "Listen to me!"

And her wild incoherence checked itself—dropped into breathless sobbing.

"I cannot stop those galleys," he said. "They have come here to retake Arbe, which you seized from us, and if what you say is true they will take it easily. Remember, nothing I can do will save the city for you. The

city is lost to you already. You must let me signal to the galleys and go on board. You must let me lead this force in the attack, as I was to have done when I left Venice."

The woman cried out upon him again in a panic, but he quieted her sharply as before, speaking in quick, emphatic words as one speaks to a terrified child.

"You must let me go!" he said. "Surely you see that my honor is in this. Whether I go or stay here in hiding, the result will be the same for the city, but if I do not go I am dishonored for life. You would be hurt by that as much as I, so let me go. If I retake the city, the council in Venice will perhaps allow me to marry you

without banishment. At any rate, there is the bare chance of it. Let me go!"

She stood away from him, drooping, downcast eyes averted, and she made an odd little despairing gesture—as it were of defeat. Arbe went from her hands in that gesture. Triumph was renounced that her lover's honor might rest unstained.

"Yes," she said—"yes, you must go, lord. I will not dishonor you. But oh, if there is a God who hears lovers' prayers, I pray that he will not let you come to harm. If you are killed this day I shall not live."

The ships were drawing nearer, down the coast of the island.

"I shall be," said the woman of

abomination, "in the city, lord, when you take it." She smiled again her wry smile, as if something grimly amused her.

"No!" said he. "Wait here or in the wood north of the Land Gate. I will come for you. You must not put yourself in danger."

"I shall be in the city, lord," she said again, "but not in danger. Oh, I pray God to keep you safe!"

"I must go," said he, looking over his shoulder at the three high galleys. "I must go, but oh, my dear, never doubt me! I shall come to you if I have to crawl on hands and knees!" He took her into his arms and kissed her mouth. It was the first time. Then he caught up his mantle and

stood, sharply outlined on the brink of the cliff, waving it about his head, until through the still morning air he heard cries from the men of the nearest ship and saw that he had attracted their attention.

Near where he stood a fissure rent the wall of rock — a watercourse half filled with earth and shale and grown up with low shrubs. Down this he made his way, plunging recklessly among bowlders, and so reached the tiny strip of beach at the cliff's foot. The first galley was already hove to, and from it a skiff put out to take him aboard. In ten minutes more the three ships bore away again southward, and Zuan Gradenigo was in command.

And, after all, they had very little fighting for their pains—too little to please them. For it seems that an hour before the three ships came into sight of the city the Venetians and Arbesani of the garrison, too carelessly guarded by their barbarian captors, rose, in street and market-place and improvised prison—rose at a preconcerted signal—and fell upon the Huns tooth and nail. Some of them had weapons, some sticks or stones, one—an Arbesan called Spalatini, and his name deserves to go down in history along with Messer Samson's—the thigh-bone of an ox which the Huns had killed and roasted whole in the Via Venezia.

When, therefore, the three galleys

under Zuan Gradenigo drew into the harbor and hurriedly made fast to the landing-place, a running hand-to-hand fight was in progress from one end of the city to the other. It was not a battle, for it had no organization whatever. It was a disgraceful mêlée. Naturally enough the Venetian reinforcements incontinently decided the day. Something over three hundred of the ban's barbarians—Huns, Slavs, and Croats — gave themselves up. Nearly two hundred killed themselves by leaping over the high westward sea-wall, and a hundred more were killed in fight or escaped by water. It was an inglorious ending to a matter which had promised so fine a struggle.

An hour after the landing, as soon as ever his duties gave him a moment's breathing space, young Zuan made up the Via Venezia — that single long street which runs north and south through the city—to the castle which sits at the street's northern end, and under which is the Land Gate, the only means of entering the town except by sea.

In the loggia of the castle he came upon the count — Jacopo Corner — a round old man with a red face, gouty, so that he went upon crutches. At this moment he was surrounded by a group of gentlemen—Arbesani for the most part, heads of the city's great families—De Dominis, Galzigna, Nemira, Zudeneghi, and such; but he

turned from them to greet young Gradenigo.

"Ah, Zuan, my lad!" he cried out, "you come in the nick of time—you and your archers! You've saved the day, for those dogs were just getting the better of us. Another hour and—St. Mark!—our heads would have been on pike-staves!"

Young Zuan struggled to preserve a face of civil sympathy, but his eyes were upon the open doors beyond. Old Jacopo seemed to read his thought.

"Ay, we have the queen bee in there! She's in my private audience-chamber, bound to a chair. Queen bee, say I? Hussy! Strumpet! Daughter of abomination! Mother of sins!" He shook a crutch at the bronze doors. "Ay,

she's there!" he said. "But the wench has cheated us, for all that. She has robbed me of the pleasure of tearing her evil bones apart—alive, that is."

Gradenigo, one hand on the door, turned slowly backward a masklike face. He felt that he was shaking and swaying like a drunken man.

"What do you—mean?" he said, in a flat voice.

Old Jacopo hobbled nearer and touched the younger man's arm. "Eh, lad!" he croaked. "Come! come! You're not yourself. The sun has got to you. You've a bound-up head, I see. Better have a rest!"

"What was it you said?" asked young Gradenigo, looking down at the

ground, which swung slowly back and forth under him.

"Yaga?" said old Jacopo. "Oh, she's dead. The wanton's dead. She got a serving-maid to stab her while she sat bound in her—"

"Out of my way!" said young Zuan, in a great voice of agony, and he dashed the old man aside and sprang through the half-open doors of the castle.

He knew where the private audience-room was, and ran there at speed. No soldier stood on guard at the door—all had been engaged in that hand-to-hand street-fight through the city. He tore the door open and reeled into the room, then closed it behind him and stood with his back against it.

The room was oddly like that room in the doge's palace where he had sat with his uncle two days since in Venice. The same great, carved table stood near the centre. The same high-set windows let in bars of colored light, which slanted down through the dimness and lay across floor and furniture in billets and lozenges of gules and vert and azure.

A single red beam rested upon the bared shoulder of the woman who hung drooping from her bonds, in the count's great chair of state; but lower, from between the woman's breasts, a darker red had coursed a downward trickling stream, and, still lower, made a red pool in the woman's lap. Her head, bent, with chin on breast, was in

SHE HUNG DROOPING IN THE GREAT CHAIR OF STATE

shadow, but out of the shadow two eyes, still half open, gleamed with the shallow, dull opacity of death.

Young Zuan, shaking against his closed door, gave a dry sob.

"Child! Child!" he mourned, bitterly. Then, all at once, his eyes narrowed in an alert frown. There was something strange here.

He crossed the room with swift steps and dropped upon one knee before the chair of state, staring close through the half-darkness.

This was a woman, beautiful indubitably, but no longer young. Her bared shoulders were thick and mature, the breast under them mature, too. On her bent face lust and hatred and cupidity and all evil passions had

graven marks that not even death could erase.

Ay! something strange here. Young Zuan's foot struck against a yielding body which lay under the heavy shadow of the table. It was another woman, and dead also, lying upon her face. Gradenigo turned the body over with panic in his heart. A squat, broad-jowled, peasant face—the serving-maid, it would seem, who had done her mistress that last service and straightway followed to serve elsewhere.

Zuan rose to his feet frowning. The matter was quite beyond him. Then one stirred in the shadows at the far end of the room, and very slowly his princess came to him through those bars of colored light.

"Child! Child!" he cried again, and tears rolled down over his cheeks. He put out shaking arms to her, but she held him away with one hand, saying only:

"Wait, lord!"

Young Zuan swung about towards the dead woman who drooped so heavily in her bonds.

"Who is—that who sits there dead?" he asked. "Corner told me it was the Princess Yaga. Some one has lied to him. Who is it?"

She gave a quick sob.

"Lord, it is the Princess Yaga," she said.

"But," said he, dropping his voice to a whisper—he did not know why—"but *you—you?*"

"Natalia Volutich, lord!" she said, whispering, too.

Young Zuan put up a hand to his bandaged head, and he drew the hand across his eyes. His eyes were bewildered, hurt—like a child's eyes before some great mystery.

"I do not understand," he said, just as a child would say it.

"Lord," cried the maid, with little sobs between her words, "I — did it first—I pretended to be Yaga first, for —duty's sake—the duty I owed to her. She had been good to me, lord, kind and loving. When your lieutenant thought I was Yaga and begged you to set sail with me, leaving Arbe, I saw that it would give her time—time to strengthen the—defences. So I lied. I did

not—care what became of me if only *she* was—safe. Then—then you were in—danger and—oh, lord, I had looked into your eyes! I had— There was never man like you. I—loved you from the first moment—the very first moment. I could not bear that you should die. So I—saved you. Lord, do you not understand? What I did I did for love's sake. This morning when I found who you were I tried to tell you the truth. I tried, lord, did I not? Did I not? Oh!" she cried, turning from him with wringing hands, "I have done everything ill and you will never forgive me; and yet, lord, I did it all for love's sake!"

She looked towards Zuan Gradenigo, but he stood silent and helpless in his

place, his eyes staring, his lips apart. The thing had been too swift and too amazing for him. His mind, unused to indirections, labored blindly at sea. And so, after a moment, she turned away again and crossed the room to where the dead woman hung, lax and heavy, in the carven chair. Sobbing, she dropped upon her knees before the chair and laid her forehead against the dead woman's arm, into whose soft flesh the leathern thongs had cut so cruelly.

"And I was away when they bound you!" she wept. "I was not with you when you died!"

Zuan Gradenigo awoke from his daze.

"Child!" he cried. "Child! Come

away from that vile body. It pollutes you!"

But the maid turned fiercely upon him.

"She loved me!" cried the maid. "She was kind to me, gentle and pitiful —and I let her die alone! Whatever she may have been to others, to me, lord, she was like the mother who died when I was a little babe. She loved me, and I let her die miserably, alone here! Oh, lord, have you nothing but curses for a woman who is dead and cannot answer you?"

Zuan bent his head. "Child," said he, gravely, "I ask your forgiveness, and hers, and God's. She was kind to you, wherefore I shall never speak ill of her again. But oh, my dear, come to

me! She is dead and you cannot comfort her now. Come to me, child, who am alive and cannot live without you."

"Oh, lord," said she, "I would not have you try!"

THE END